

THE WAY OF THE GHOST BIRD—NOT

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This past spring I had the opportunity to watch a video called “Ghost Bird.”¹ It was about the sighting of a strikingly beautiful bird that has been extinct for almost 100 years. I’m talking about the ivory-billed woodpecker. For just a brief moment in history, people who care about the survival of all the different bird people, animal people, and plant people rejoiced that a once extinct bird had somehow come back to life. It was as if a warrior had returned victorious from battle with the enemy, assuring the people that all were once again safe and the future looked bright. Not unexpectedly, some people went to extremes as they sought to benefit from the return of the ivory-billed woodpecker. One barber went so far as to advertise an ivory-billed woodpecker haircut. Another person, who apparently aspired to be a guide for big game hunters, offered his services to those willing to trek into the Big Woods region of Arkansas. But, unfortunately, they were chasing down a ghost, a bird that no longer exists.

Occasionally, when I was working on my book on *Choctaw Women in a Chaotic World*,² I wondered if I was chasing down a ghost. I was in search of Choctaw women who held the title of Beloved Woman, much like one finds with other indigenous nations in the Southeast. Beloved Women are those women that the people respected, revered, and honored, someone they held up as an outstanding member of the community. Surely, Beloved Women existed among the Choctaw, but finding them was like finding a ghost—in fact, two kinds of ghosts. One ghost was like the shadow of something that you cannot quite see. You know what I mean. Have you ever driven down a dark, wooded, country road late at night and seen a movement out of the corner of your eye? You knew something was there, but when you turned your head and looked, you did not see anything. That is what happened to me when I looked for evidence of Choctaw Beloved Women. I kept seeing flickers of Choctaw Beloved Women in eighteenth and nineteenth-century documents, but when I would dig further into the dusty, old books, I always seemed not quite to find one, but I knew something was there.

The other kind of ghost I grappled with was that of something that never existed. The idea is if you don’t find much information, then maybe what you are looking for does not exist. That is where my research might draw a snicker or two from other historians. Let me explain.

¹ “Ghost Bird,” directed by Scott Crocker, DVD, (Berkeley, CA: Small Change Productions).

² Michelene Pesantubbee, *Choctaw Women in a Chaotic World* (Albuquerque: U New Mexico P, 2005).

In the video on the ghost bird, everyone was debating whether or not someone had really seen the ivory-billed woodpecker. Was the bird just a figment of someone's imagination? The filmmakers made light of the debate when they quoted Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld who once explained that, "the absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence. . . . Simply because you do not have evidence that something does exist does not mean that you have evidence that it doesn't exist."³ Okay, did everyone get that?

The people in the audience howled with laughter as they listened to Rumsfeld's convoluted reasoning. Me, I squirmed a bit in my seat, because I use a similar argument myself. I hope not in such a convoluted way. My argument goes something like this: Just because we don't find the phrase "Beloved Women" in the Choctaw dictionary, although we do find "Beloved Men", and we do not read stories about famous Choctaw Beloved Women as we do with the Cherokee Nancy Ward, does not mean Choctaw Beloved Women did not exist. Now I do not want to sound too much like Rumsfeld, but the absence of Beloved Women titles is not evidence of the absence of Beloved Women.

I could spend time explaining why we do not find much evidence of the existence of Choctaw Beloved Women, but I would rather talk about why we know there were and are Beloved Women. So, let me start with a story. All religions have stories whether we call them histories, mythologies, tales, or sacred utterances. These stories, whether from the Bible, the Qur'an, the Torah, or Choctaw oral histories, teach us about our values, about how we should live as a community. The story I am going to tell is one I told at my niece's and nephew's naming ceremony. This story takes place long, long ago before Europeans arrived on this continent, when the Choctaws tell of first arriving at *Nunih Waiya*, our beloved mound.

One day, two hunters left their village in search of game to feed their hungry families. After searching all day long all they managed to catch was a single black hawk. They roasted the hawk and sat down to eat it, but at that moment they heard a soft and melancholy sound coming from the distance. When they stood up and looked they saw a beautiful woman standing on a grassy mound. They ran over to her and she told them she was hungry. They immediately ran back to the fire to get their roasted hawk and gave it to her. She barely touched the hawk but she told the hunters that their kindness had saved her and she would not forget them. She told them to return to the exact same spot at the next midsummer moon. When the hunters returned they found a corn plant growing on the mound where she had stood. From then on the Choctaw began holding an annual five-day dance and feast called

³ Quote is in reference to Iraq's weapons of destruction, Daniel Kurtzman, [n.d.] "Donald Rumsfeld Quotes," <http://politicalhumor.about.com/cs/quotethis/a/rumsfeldquotes.htm> (accessed May 4, 2011).

Tanchi Okchamali Hihla, or Green Corn Dance.⁴

Now Choctaws, as well as Creeks and Cherokees, know what a Green Corn feast means. *Tomfulla*, *tanchi labona*, *banaha*, *tanchi pulvaska*—all of these are Choctaw corn dishes. [Mmmm, I'm getting hungry now. When is this over?]

This short story can tell us a lot about Choctaw life and Choctaw women. The basic message here is that men are the hunters and women are the farmers. Sometimes we forget that before Europeans came and introduced patriarchy to Choctaw people, the women in many Native communities including the Choctaw were the farmers. They had responsibility for the care of the cornfields and orchards, as well as the distribution of the foods brought into the family or community. However, there is much more to this story than that. The story tells us that humans cannot always depend upon an abundance of game to keep them fed. They also need plant foods like corn. In other words, men and women work cooperatively and collaboratively to provide for their families and communities. Hunters are not more valued than farmers. Both are equally beneficial to the community.

The story also tells us that generosity towards others is important. The hunters gave up the only food they had so that the woman could eat, and the woman, *Ohoyo Osh Chisba*, gave of herself so that the people could have corn. Now, corn does not grow or proliferate on its own. It takes the intervention of human hands to keep producing. Just as women nurtured the corn plants by weeding them and keeping birds and other animals out of the cornfields, they also nurtured their families and communities. This story exemplifies what it means to be beloved. A beloved person gives of oneself to benefit the community; a beloved person nurtures others so that they can be the best that they can be; and a beloved person is generous to others. No wonder we honor and cherish beloved people.

For Choctaw people, as well as the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Creek, and Seminole, the honoring of women was exemplified through the Green Corn Dance. We think the Green Corn Dance is more about the men because we've been taught to look at our own dances through the patriarchal eyes of Europeans. But if we take a closer look at the Choctaw dance we can see a different message.

Let's begin with the purpose of the Green Corn and the communal meal that everyone participated in as part of the ceremony. Traditionally, during the Green Corn everyone feasted and danced to celebrate the harvest of the corn and to pray for success in hunting among many other things. Women provided the corn and prepared all the food for the feast. However, Indians do not live by bread alone. In the old days they needed a little venison to make the feast complete and men provided that meat. So as in the *Ohoyo*

⁴ John R. Swanton, "Source Material for the Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians," *Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1931), 103; Gideon Lincecum, 1861, *Traditional History of the Chahta Nation, Part I* (Austin: U Texas Library [March, 1932]), 20-26.

Osh Chisba story, the men handed over their game to the women and the women shared all their food with everyone. Women and men contributed equally to the feast, although in many ways corn was seen as more valuable than meat.

Why do I say that? In one story told by a Choctaw man in the 1820s, there was a time when the Choctaw moved to a new place. Upon their arrival the women planted only part of their corn seed because they did not know if the corn would grow well in their new location. At harvest time they picked only 80 ears of corn so that the rest could be used for seed. The *miko* (or leader) told the women that they should distribute only one kernel of corn to each person and although they would have more meat than corn, it would be as if the feast consisted entirely of green corn.⁵ Think about that. That is a powerful statement. One kernel of corn per person was all that was needed for the Green Corn ceremony to be complete.

What makes corn so valuable? Corn as well as other crops provided two-thirds of the Choctaw's food supply. Without crops the Choctaw populations would not have thrived as well as they did, they would have had to relocate more often to follow the available game, and families might have suffered more episodes of famine forcing communities to split up into smaller units in order to survive. Corn also was used as medicine and for offerings. When diplomats or visitors arrived they received corn both as part of their meals and as parting gifts. Since the Green Corn Ceremony celebrated the corn harvest, it also acknowledged and celebrated the women who grew, prepared, and provided the corn that made life possible. Just as the stomp dance cannot go on until the turtles (or the women shell shakers) come out, the Green Corn Ceremony could not go on without the women and their corn.

In fact, I imagine that the only way the Green Corn dance could have continued without women is if some men dressed as women and carried out their roles. This would not be that unusual. For example, among the Haudenosaunee people, if the men's council wanted to communicate with the women's council, or vice versa, a male representative had to be made a woman. In other words, he would have to have female power ceremonially conferred upon him. He would then dress in a skirt before delivering the message.⁶ Among the Yurok people, during the White Deer Dance, if the skins the male dancers used belonged to a male deer, they removed its antlers and the buck became a female deer because "women are the dance" and only females participate in the dance. "Men set aside their roles as men" in service to the creative principle of life.⁷

Since the Green Corn ceremony is also about the creative principle, about the importance of women, I want to talk a little bit about the impact of ending the practice of the Green Corn ceremony. Now some Choctaws might argue

⁵ Lincecum, 1861, 169-171.

⁶ Barbara Alice Mann, *Iroquoian Women: the Gantowisas* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 123.

⁷ Mary Virginia Rojas, "She Bathes in a Sacred Place: Rites of Reciprocity, Power and Prestige in Alta California," *Wicazo Sa Review* (Spring, 2003):144.

that the ceremony continues today in the form of the annual Labor Day weekend festival, but the Labor Day weekend festival is a product of the world in which we live now. It embodies Choctaw and European/American ways [think pig races]; traditional and Christian elements; and Choctaw and other tribal cultures. Although some Choctaws are attending Green Corn dances today, the ceremony is no longer a nationwide event. In many ways, that's okay. We all adapt to changes and every generation adds its own distinct elements, sort of like creating the ivory-billed woodpecker haircut.

So we need to ask ourselves what was the cost of no longer carrying out the Green Corn ceremony? And what did Choctaws replace it with? With the Green Corn ceremony the Choctaws participated in a complex ceremonial system that encouraged and reinforced complementary roles between elders and youth (in other words wisdom and fearlessness). You parents out there know what I mean. Parents are older and more experienced and ideally will consider the consequences before jumping into danger. Teenagers, however, are another story. They usually act impulsively. Now this is not necessarily a bad thing. Wisdom helps us to consider all options before committing ourselves to danger, but once that decision is made, those who will act on conviction without fearing the consequences are needed to carry out those dangerous tasks. That is why in times of war we draft eighteen-year olds instead of fifty-year-olds. (Well, physical condition does play a part.) That is also why the young typically were war leaders in earlier times and elders were the peacetime leaders. Choctaw society understood the need for complementary roles. The same is true for women and men. They provided different things for the family, like corn and meat, but together they produced everything needed to maintain the Choctaw economy.

When the Green Corn ceremony ceased so, too, did an important way of recognizing women's contributions. Although we did not lose the idea that women were important, we replaced the teachings of the Green Corn ceremony with western patriarchal ideas. The missionaries taught Choctaw men that they should be both farmer and hunter and women helpmates or in service to men. Complementary roles were replaced with hierarchical ones, where men had greater status than women. Women were seen as the weaker sex who needed to be led by the men. The cessation of the Green Corn Ceremony meant little boys and girls lost an opportunity to experience traditional complementary roles at work. They no longer heard the stories of *Ohoyo Osh Chisba* and how she and the hunters helped each other. Instead they learned that men were the providers and women prepared what the men provided. Women's roles became secondary.

So what is wrong with hierarchical relationships? Hierarchical relationships can and do lead to lesser respect for those we consider secondary. We love winners, not losers. Have you ever heard anyone go up to the losing team and say, "Wow, that was a great game! You really lost big time! Can I have your autograph?" Let me give you another example. Someone who earns a huge salary is often treated better and gets more respect than someone who makes very little money. Sadly, we have seen

these hierarchical relationships played out among men and women. The idea that women are secondary, that they are weaker than men (and I'm not talking about muscles), has contributed to violence against women.

The degree of abuse towards women whether by husbands, boyfriends, sons, or co-workers has reached epidemic levels in Native American communities. According to the 2005 Violence Against Women Act, Native American women suffer more than double the rate of rape or sexual assault than any other group. Homicide is the third leading cause of death for Native American women. Charon Asetoyer reported in the *Seminole Tribune* that "Sexual assault and domestic violence are so widespread in Indian Country that spousal abuse is occurring in younger and younger couples."⁸

My guess is that if I asked for a show of hands of every Native American here today, and probably everyone here, who knows of just one woman, whether a mother, wife, sister, daughter, aunt, or girlfriend, who has been verbally abused by a man or boy—and that abuse can range from being called stupid to threats too horrible to mention—I would guess that at least two-thirds of you would raise your hands. If we factor in physical abuse towards women, from threatening to hit someone to beating them, I would guess that there are very few people in Indian country who do not know of abuse towards some woman. I would also guess that many people who have witnessed or heard about abuse did little about it. This is not unusual. I look back on my younger days with regret because I saw a lot of abuse towards women and girls, and I often did nothing, most often out of fear. Fear that I might be the next target if I interfered, or that if I called the police, I would be ostracized by my own family or friends for getting someone thrown in jail. As I got older and started intervening by taking the person to safety or by calling the police, I felt frustration or helplessness when nothing changed.

Why do we do nothing, or why don't things change? Too often we blame the victim, or we don't respect them. I remember one day talking to a Native American student about respect for elders. The student replied that she does not refer to senior citizens in her tribe as elders because most of them don't deserve the title. She said elders are respected and honored people, and she saw too many elders who were alcoholics or drug addicts, people who didn't take proper care of their children, or who used abusive language. She looked at me and said, "You might not agree, but that's how I see it."

Her comment rather surprised me. I have always felt that one should have respect for one's elders. As I grew older and learned more and more about different Native American traditions and histories, I also came to understand the idea that any Native person, who can survive into their golden years, deserves some respect for simply having survived. For many of us that survival entails enduring racism, poverty, and other social problems that come from generations of colonization that includes horrific boarding school

⁸ Charon Asetoyer, "Public Denial, Private Pain," *Seminole Tribune* quoted in *Sexual Assault in Indian Country, Confronting Sexual Violence* (Enola, PA: NSVRC, 2000), National Sexual Violence Resource Center, <http://www.nsvrc.org> (accessed July 5, 2011).

experiences, suppression of religious freedom, and loss of homelands. We do not have to attend boarding schools to be impacted by those in our communities who did and endured abuse. We also do not have to be the perpetrators or victims of verbal or physical abuse to be affected by it. Each and every time a little boy hears someone abuse his mother or sister or auntie or grandmother, he learns little by little that women are not as good as men and need to be taught lessons. Each time a little girl witnesses such behavior; she learns over time that she somehow deserves such abuse.

I believe that abuse of women is one of the costs of losing the Green Corn ceremony or any other Native American ceremony that celebrated women, whether it is a puberty ceremony or a harvest ceremony. Let me explain what I mean by that. The Choctaw at one time determined ceremonial and other responsibilities based on clan membership. Among the Choctaw, clan membership was matrilineally based. In other words, you belonged to the clan of your mother. The spouse or father of the children moved into the home of the mother. This insured the safety and well-being of the women and children.

I am not trying to claim that abuse never occurred in traditional Choctaw families back in the old days. What I do mean is that if a man abused his spouse or children, he was dealt with quickly and decisively by the woman's father, and any unmarried brothers, sons, and uncles who still remained in the household, as well as by the womenfolk. He most likely found his belongings bundled up outside the home, letting him know he had better hope his mother or sister would let him move back in with them. He also might find himself ostracized by his wife's clan and by much of the community.

I am well aware that I don't know what my clan is, and many Choctaw I have talked to do not know, either. That may be because most of the Choctaw I know live outside the boundaries of the Choctaw Nation. I am sure some Choctaws must know their clans, but for contemporary religious and social responsibilities, clanship is not a significant factor. I am not going to argue that the loss of the Green Corn ceremony led to the loss of the clanship system. However, I do strongly believe that the loss of the Green Corn ceremony contributed to the loss of the clanship system. And, it was the clan through the matrilineal line that protected women and recognized their importance to the survival and well-being of the family and community. Women were not secondary, but were complementary to men, and men were complementary to women.

The loss of the Green Corn ceremony also meant the loss of an important means of reinforcing patience and respect. Think about it. In the old days no one, and I mean no one, dared to eat even one small kernel of corn no matter how hungry they were until the Green Corn ceremonial feast. Can you imagine what that was like? When I drive by a field of sweet corn today I am always tempted to jump out of my car and pick a few ears to take home to throw on the grill. The only reason I don't is, I am afraid I will get stuck on the barbed wire fence, and because I learned long ago that "Thou shalt not steal" (or is it "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's corn"?).

Try to imagine what it was like in the old days. The Moravian missionaries wrote about seeing Indian people literally starving while fields of ripe corn stretched out in all directions. Even if it meant the corn would get hard if they waited, they said no one ate the corn before the Green Corn ceremony. So here you are, hungry, and it is Green Corn time. All the women are at their cooking fires fixing all kinds of delicious corn dishes. You can just smell the aroma of fresh corn mixed with venison or berries or nuts. Then you watch as the women walk into the central area carrying bowls and baskets of food. Your mouth is watering, your stomach is growling. Yet, you wait. You would never go up to one of the women and say, "Hey, that sure smells good! Let me have a taste." Or, "I'm starving! Can I have some now?" No, you wait. The food is blessed, and gifts of food are given to visitors or diplomats. Finally, everyone gets to eat. And, it is so good.

Now I do not know about you, but if I am hungry, I am going to walk into the kitchen and get something to eat. I do not care who is cooking or for what reason. I might defend my rudeness by letting them know my blood sugar is low and I've got to eat now, but however good my reasons are, the fact is that I do not always wait until the cook says, "Dinner is served." I've watched as cooks have swatted someone's hand away as they reached for a piece of cornbread or a spoonful of *tomfulla* before the meal is served.

What does this have to do with abuse? I've also seen men yell at their spouses because dinner is not ready on time, or because their spouse fixed something they did not want. We've lost our respect for patience or for the person preparing the meal. The creative and nurturing principles of the feminine and food have been forgotten. Women are considered to be just helpmates who are not helping according to the desires of those particular men. Those men have never learned the importance of women because stories like that of *Ohoyo Osh Chisba* and her gift of corn, and the caring of plants and the earth, are not regularly told anymore. Among the Choctaw the story might be told at the annual Choctaw festival, or it might be published in an issue of *Bishinik*, but it is not taught regularly to the children.

I could go on and on about the cost of losing the Green Corn ceremony among the Choctaw, but it will not change things. What will change things is examining and evaluating how we live in the world today. For the majority of Choctaws, Christianity is an integral part of their lives. They look to the Bible to learn the rules they should follow and how to behave towards one another. However, that does not mean that Choctaws or other Native peoples gave up their cultures for a new religion. We all know that we have not lost our identities as Native Americans, but we have struggled to survive as Choctaws or Cherokees or Creeks. And the message has not always been delivered in the same way. In the past our ancestors were sometimes forced to speak in English only; at other times Christian literature and songs were translated into our languages. The suppression of our languages was cruel, but not everyone lost their language. The Choctaw Nation, for instance, has a vibrant Choctaw language program.

Becoming Christian did not mean that Choctaws stopped being Choctaw.

Just because we were forced by necessity to create frybread from wheat that Europeans introduced to the Americas does not mean that we gave up our cornbread. Now I know that today we see frybread more often than cornbread at Native gatherings, but put a plate of cornbread on the table next to that pot of beans, and I guarantee you it will disappear. Serve them both, and Choctaws will eat both.

What I am saying is that Native people can be both Christian and Choctaw. From the time I first entered college in 1971 I have heard repeatedly from different elders all across the country that you do not have to choose between being “American” or being “Native American.” The ones I listened to always said we should take the best of what European/Americans have to offer us, and reject the rest. They applied that philosophy to everything. In college they said it to encourage young Native Americans to stay in school and get an education. They might phrase it differently, to say you don’t have to believe everything they teach you in college, but learn what will help you and your community. Or, they might say, “Learn to read and speak English to the best of your ability so that you can communicate effectively with other Americans, but do not forget your language.”

When it comes to finding Choctaw beloved women I tried to follow that philosophy. I used whatever texts or books I could find written by non-Indians, no matter how offensive I might have found them, in order to separate helpful information from the useless, and I always tried to remember to look at that information through the lessons learned from Choctaw stories and experiences. Believe me, that was not easy. I did not grow up speaking or understanding Choctaw, so I can only try to understand Choctaw stories as they were translated by outsiders. That has been a real challenge.

But what I did find was that, *de facto*, Choctaw Beloved Women existed. By *de facto*, I mean that I found Choctaw women who carried out tasks and roles that were typically carried out by Beloved Women in other indigenous cultures. I did not find the title being applied to any particular Choctaw woman, although I did find a couple of general references to Choctaw Beloved Women. The absence of evidence of titles, however, is not evidence to me of the absence of Beloved Women (a little Rumsfield here). Rather, Choctaw stories like that about *Ohoyo Osh Chisba*, or documents that describe women doing sacred or important tasks such as preparing the Green Corn ceremonial meal, are evidence of the existence of Beloved Women.

The question now is whether or not Choctaw Beloved Women went the way of the Ghost Bird. Are they extinct? Did our honoring of special women disappear, only to seem momentarily to return in my book? Is this a case of the absence of evidence being evidence of the absence of Beloved Women in the present day? Let me go back to the story of the student who preferred to use the term senior citizen instead of elder, because older people in her community did not live up to her expectations of who should be honored with the designation “elder.”

I know where that student is coming from. Like many other Native Americans, I have spent a lifetime around alcoholics, drug addicts, and the

chronically unemployed. I have had days of being disgusted, or angry, or scared, or completely stressed out by someone's inability to take care of him or herself, never mind her family. I have struggled to come to terms with a problem that is not mine, and yet is very much my problem. It is everyone's problem.

I can honestly say that I cannot think of a single person I like better when he or she is drunk rather than sober. But, I do know Native people with addictions, who, when they are sober are the kindest-hearted people who love their families and would do anything for them. When they are sober, they will go without so that their kids can have food and clothes. They will share their last pan of cornbread or pot of beans with a sibling or friend even though they have no idea where the next meal will come from. Maybe we can't quite call them Beloved, because they will turn to drink or drugs to handle their fears, and then they may not be so kind. They do not have the required skin seven layers thick to let troubles slide right off their backs. However, they are people whom you can almost glimpse as Beloved, but then alcohol enters the picture and like a ghost the image disappears.

While we cannot condone or tolerate such addictions, we can understand their genesis—which did not suddenly appear, fully formed, in some individuals. Such addictions have been passed from generation to generation through decades of abuse. As far back as the early 1700s Choctaw women were sexually assaulted by French soldiers and colonists who came into the area now known as Louisiana and Mississippi, following after the horrors perpetrated by Spanish explorers forcing their way across the Southeast. Choctaw women were excluded, first by the French, then by the British, and finally by the Americans, who refused to negotiate with them on economic, political, or military issues. French Jesuits feared that the mere presence of Choctaw women might cause them to have erotic thoughts. Forbidden entry into missionaries' homes, Choctaw women could not attend the religious instruction typically offered there. After the French Jesuits were forced to leave the area and American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions personal began arriving in the early nineteenth century, Choctaw women continued to face active discrimination. Such measures included, but were not limited to, being discouraged from speaking their native language, participating in traditional ceremonies, or maintaining their day-to-day cultural heritage of distinctive hairstyle and clothing. The boarding school system perpetuated much of this abuse.

I could go on all day about the abuses, but the point of all this is to ask the question, "How long does it take a community of people to recover from abuses that might be centuries old, or, that are so ingrained in our society that in some cases have become normative?" How can a people recover when abuses continue up to the present day? We all know that dysfunctional behavior is partly learned behavior and is passed on from generation to generation. Alcoholism, drug addiction, and abuse become an unfortunate part of culture. As a young person I often heard one Native person say to another, "What kind of Indian are you?" because the person chose not

to drink or at least not to get drunk. As a professor in a university where alcohol and drugs are part of that culture, I hear questions and comments about what good drinkers Native people are because they consume a lot. I respond, “No, those Native Americans are bad drinkers precisely because they consume too much.”

Why do I bring up abusive behaviors towards and among Choctaw people or indigenous peoples in general? I do so because despite centuries of abuse, Native Americans have survived and in many cases, flourished. As I said before some alcoholic or drug abusing women have good hearts and good intentions, but their addictions lead to behaviors contrary to that of Beloved Women. But I do believe we have Choctaw Beloved Women in places where we might not think to look. When I look back upon my childhood growing up in Fife Memorial Indian Methodist Church, now United Methodist Church, I remember fondly the adult women in the church. Some were Choctaw, others Creek or Cherokee. Some of them were married to alcoholics; others were single women or single parents doing the best they could to raise their children within the Methodist church. The women with alcoholic husbands were essentially single parents because they had to care for their husbands, too, or they were on their own when their husbands were off in bars or sitting in jail. Let me be clear. Those husbands are dysfunctional and possibly abusers, but they are also victims of abuse, but that is another story. Today my focus is on the women.

These women lived either in the depths of poverty or on the edge of poverty, and every day was a struggle to feed their children. But like the great hunters of the past, they went hunting, hunting for jobs that typically paid minimum wage or less, hunting for USDA commodities, hunting for the best possible bargains in five-and-dime stores or Goodwill, and doing without so that their children could have some necessity.

Those same women would cook over hot stoves on steamy, hot summer days without air conditioning, sometimes staying up most of the night to get pies and cakes and *tomfulla*, *banaha*, cornbread, and beans cooked for first Sunday dinner at church or for holiday dinners. They would be in the tiny kitchen in the back of the church heating up foods or preparing the tables for everyone who was eagerly waiting to eat. I recall my mother, in particular. Sometimes she sat down at a table and either nibbled at her food or just sat there quietly and listened to the conversations around her. If someone asked her why she wasn't eating, she would say she wasn't hungry. She often said that at home, too. Now a cook might quip back, “Oh, I understand. I sample everything all day long, too, while I cook so I'm not hungry at mealtime either.” But, I don't think that is what was going on. I think my mother, like the other women in the church, was worn out. They were exhausted, and hot, and just wanted to sit, but those women did not make everyone feel bad or self-conscious by saying they were exhausted by fixing all that food half the night just so everyone else could eat. With grace they ate sparingly, and much like *Ohoyo Osh Chisba* simply said they were not very hungry.

Now these women who did all this work and who had to face the daily

challenges of feeding their families with whatever they could hunt up could have turned to alcohol. They could have simply thrown up their hands and said, "I cannot do this alone." They may have thought it; they may have even voiced it at times; but they did not do it. They strove to show their children a different way through the Methodist church. Like the Beloved Women of the past, even when war was raging around them—in this case, in the forms of alcoholism, poverty, and abuse—they stood their ground; they pushed for peace for family and community, often in the shelter of the church.

I'm not saying all was good. It was not. The Methodist Church was and is complicit in the perpetuation of abuse towards Native women. However, those women with their strength and their fortitude helped their children to survive, and in many cases, thrive. Beloved Women in the old days did not stop war, but they prevented many skirmishes and battles, and helped negotiate eventual peace. The women of Fife Memorial, and I am sure other Methodist churches, did not stop the wars with alcoholism and abuse, but they prevented many attacks on their children—probably more than we will ever know, as they kept much to themselves—and they negotiated peaceful places for their children which included Sunday school or church events. In my mind, they are Beloved Women. They did not go the way of the ghost bird. They exist and we have only to acknowledge them.⁹

⁹ One additional reference of importance is: "Title IX Safety for Indian Women" in Violence Against Women Act and Department of Justice Reauthorization Act of 2005, Public Law 109-162, 109th Cong. (1/5/2006).